

Traditional Crafts and Tourism on Cape Cod and the Islands by Eleanor Wachs

Tourism both curses and blesses Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket – curses them because it brings overdevelopment and suburbanization but blesses them because tourists provide an economic base for many of the towns on the Cape and islands. In the case of traditional crafts the tourists' desire to bring back a souvenir from a vacation often meshes with a craftsman's desire to maintain a tradition while creating a viable business. Two cases of the interaction of traditional crafts and tourism are Gay Head pottery and Nantucket Lightship baskets.

Gay Head, one of the principal towns of Martha's Vineyard, is home to one of the largest concentrations of Wampanoag Indians in Massachusetts. An Indian legend relates that the spectacular Gay Head Cliffs, a tourist attraction since the 1890s, were created when Maushop, the giant, pulled whales out of the sea for food and killed them in his den, the whale blood and grease staining the cliffs.

Beginning in the 1930s several Wampanoag families made swirl-designed pottery from the multi-colored clay of the cliffs, selling it to tourists. The technique used to make the pottery was developed by the Indians much earlier, but tourists provided the first market for the pieces. Gladys Widdis, whose Indian name is Wild Cranberry, learned how to make pottery and jewelry when she was a girl. She remembers tourists buying ashtrays, bottles, paperweights and glass jars in the shape of lighthouses and filled with clay dust. They were sold from stands that her family set up at the top of the cliff path.

Gladys is now one of only two people granted permission to gather clay from the cliffs, which were recently declared a nationally protected historic landmark. She still makes small items of pottery (pots, miniature canoes and jewelry) but now simply gives them away to friends. Tourists still flock to the Gay Head Cliffs, but the souvenirs that they buy at the small seasonal shops run by the Indians are more reflective of the stereotypical image of Indian "products" (plastic bows and arrows, feathered head-dresses, arrowheads) than indigenous folklife items. Still, if tourists had not bought the pottery in years past, the tradition might have been lost altogether. Gladys is currently teaching one of her grandsons to make pottery and has demonstrated her technique at the Boston Children's Museum.

Nantucket lightship baskets were first made as a pastime by the men of the South Shoal lightship. Today these sturdy baskets are popular as ladies' pocketbooks, having been redesigned in 1949 by Jose Reyes, a Harvard graduate from the Phillipines.

Lightship basketmaking, done on a handmade wooden mold, takes anywhere from thirty-five to sixty hours. If not for the pocketbook trade, which attracts wealthy summer tourists, the baskets would have little or no market, for most lightship baskets today are priced from several hundred to over a thousand dollars. Once tied to an occupation and a geographic area, these baskets demonstrate how a traditional hand-crafted process can be retained despite a significant change in its market and use.

Gladys Widdis of Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard, working on a pot made of clay from the Gay Head Cliffs. Photo by Eleanor Wachs



Bobby Marks, Nantucket lightship basketmaker, in his Osterville workshop. Photo by Eleanor Wachs

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